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Brezhnev Letter on Soviet Bomber Is Said to Lack Desired Assurances

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VIENNA, June 16 — Administration officials disclosed today that a special letter from Leonid I. Brezhnev, the Soviet leader, to President Carter on a new Soviet bomber is couched in vague language that repeats the Soviet contention that the plane is an intermediate not a strategic weapon but that does not give the explicit assurances on its production and deployment that Washington once sought.

Dispute on Definition

The White House contends that American security interests are met by a companion letter from President Carter to Mr. Brezhnev, spelling out that Moscow cannot produce more than 30 of these bombers a year, the present rate, and by an advance warning in the arms negotiations that Washington would consider any violation of these terms equivalent to abrogation of the arms package to be signed here Monday.

But given the debate in Congress over the TU-26 bomber, which is known in the West as the Backfire, the vagueness of Mr. Brezhnev's letter may be a factor in the debate and could add force to demands of critics in the Senate that explicit restrictions on the Backfire be written into the arms treaty.

For more than six years, the Backfire has been a major obstacle to a new arms agreement. Some American military officers contend that with refueling it could strike targets in the United States and should therefore be counted among the strategic weapons limited by the new treaty.

But Moscow has insisted that the Backfire is an intermediate-range bomber and should therefore be excluded. President Carter has agreed, subject to the stipulations in his exchange of letters with Mr. Brezhnev, although there were indications that the two sides were still discussing the issue here today.

On another critical point, officials here said that with careful wording of the detailed specifications for testing and deploying new weaponry, the United States felt that it had nailed down restrictions that will force the Kremlin to choose only one of two missiles being developed. American officials said this had been achieved in the final 10 days of negotiations in Geneva, which evidently proved more substantive than had been expected a month ago when the basic accord was reached at the top level negotiations.

The 2 Soviet Programs

The new treaty allows each side to introduce one new missile between now and the end of 1985, when the treaty expires. But American intelligence has detected two Soviet programs to develop new missiles. One would replace the old single-warhead SS-11 missile and the other would replace the somewhat larger, more modern, multiple-warhead SS-17 or SS-19 missiles.

American negotiators thought they detected an effort by their Soviet counterparts to include language in the treaty that would allow modifications in existing missiles to make them as much as 20 percent smaller and lighter and different in other ways.

The Americans said that under such language the Soviet Union then could have reduced the size of the SS-19 missile, changed its payload and fuel supply, and used it to replace the old single-shot SS-11 without technically being charged for a new missile.

Loophole Reported Closed

In the effort to preclude such a possibility, negotiators in Washington insisted on and eventually won Soviet agreement that no existing missiles could be made more than 5 percent larger or smaller.

And in Geneva in the last few days, they have insisted on other language to prevent changes in the weight of the warhead section of the missile and to regulate when the amount of fuel used in missile tests can be changed. This would prevent Moscow from concealing a new smaller missile by saying it was flying larger existing missiles with less than a full load of fuel. Missile weight, of which fuel is a large part, is a telling factor to the intelligence experts who monitor Soviet missile development.

The effect of these technical negotiations, American officials said, is to force the Soviet leaders to choose between an entirely new light missile to replace the SS-11 and a different, larger missile to replace the SS-17 and SS-19 missiles, which are more sophisticated and carry more warheads than the SS-11.

"We have been anxious to block them from doing both and we were successful," said an American official. "We'd really prefer them to go ahead with a single-warhead replacement for the SS-11, because it poses less of a strategic threat overall and less of a threat to our land-based ICBM's. And they may prefer that, too, because the SS-11's are really old missiles — liquid-fueled, expensive and difficult to maintain, and not very quick on reaction."

Flexibility for Cruise Missile

Limiting the modernization of the Soviet arsenal has been a major objective of the Administration in the arms talks. That is one reason Washington insisted that no more than one new missile be introduced by either side.

On the other hand, American negotiators feel they succeeded in the last 10 days in preserving flexibility for American development of the cruise missile, a drone that flies low and has greater accuracy than intercontinental ballistic missiles.

Over the last two weeks, Soviet negotiators have tried to impose a single set of specifications on all cruise missiles, whether launched from the air, sea or land. But American officials said "separate definitions" for the land and sea-based versions were retained, allowing for greater versatility later on.

The American negotiators in Geneva were led by Ralph Earle, a lawyer who was brought into the negotiations by Paul Nitze, who has become one of the most outspoken foes of the new treaty.

Opposition From a General

It is known, moreover, that Lieut. Gen. John Rowny, the representative of the Joint Chiefs of Staff throughout the arms negotiations on the first strategic arms treaty and this one, is retiring from the Army on June 30 to be free to oppose the treaty publicly.

General Rowny has said privately that he objects to the terms on the Backfire bomber, the allowance for Soviet heavy missiles without American counterparts and restrictions on American sharing of cruise-missile technology with NATO allies, among other points.

Officials disclosed today that the entire negotiating team had been invited to the signing ceremony but that General Rowny had declined.

The final burst of negotiating in Geneva, one top American negotiator reported, has included 20 meetings in the past 10 days, most of them between Mr. Earle and the head of the Soviet team, Viktor Karpov. The final session on a substantive issue ended at 3:32 A.M. Thursday.